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My Sister's Legacy

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I guess I had never really known what "normal" looked like until I met Scott. Before, dysfunction was everywhere: in the air of the car, blue bed sheets, in my tea. It was old routine for emotions to manifest themselves in impulses of destruction: hours of sobbing alone on the floor of a bedroom, dark inside because every curtain was drawn; screaming, storming, spitting, seething, stomping matches that inevitably heard impassioned promises of suicide—once, shreds of newly-purchased prom dress, scattered across the front yard. More often than not the explosive violence was rerouted inward; my sister particularly was prone to self-harm. After a while I actually began to expect to see the red crisscross combination of cuts and scars that had initially been so horrifying to me. My sister may have hated us all at times, but she didn't hate anyone as consistently as she did herself.

Once my sister was responsible for watching our pastor neighbor's pet cat when he went out of town (my mom had volunteered her for the job). During his first week away, she and Mom had a disagreement so severe that my sister raced up to the room we shared, slopped together a duffel bag of stained camisoles and jeans and underwear, and escaped from the house through the window. When she didn't return that night, Mom decided to go feed the cat herself—only to discover that my sister had killed it with rat poisoning and now had locked herself in Reverend Carl's bathroom so that she could bawl her eyes out over the evil deed. Mom had to beg the reverend over the telephone in the spirit of our Lord's mercy not to call the police. He relented, but only eventually, and moved houses shortly afterwards.

My sister was an artist—a brilliant sketcher. If a stranger asked who she was, she'd offer, "An artist!" before she would her name. She would always claim that the only person that had ever come close to understanding her was a woman she had met by chance at an art exhibit, who complimented my sister's displayed works and then remarked that, as my sister was so evidently an artist of immense giftedness, she no doubt experienced the accompanying "artist's temperament." My sister welcomed this appealing analysis and replied that she indeed was often subject to deep "turmoil of spirit." It all sounded very poetic: some dramatic condition suffered exclusively by those who were "true" romantics, those whose artistic genius plunged them into the chaos of profound emotions. Doctors, they'd have a different term, I think: bipolar disorder.

But despite the days of depression, of feeling absolutely nothing—"the worst," she said— of amazing rage and selfishness, my sister also had periods of bright and sunny disposition, of relative stability, lots of laughter and happiness; there were jokes between us, even ones shared with our parents. For all her highs and her lows, though, my sister was almost never at peace with herself, never calm. She regretted her heat-of-the-moment actions intensely, but fleetingly—emotional reflection never solidified into repentance. So it was hard on all of us, of course—we only knew to expect that which we wouldn't be expecting.

Mom loved us a lot, I should probably say. But she didn't really know how to properly handle her eldest daughter's extremes of emotion—the tantrums, with her fury; the good times, with her bubbly charm. Never seeking out real medical classification of my sister's behaviors, she said there was something "wrong" with her "chemistry," or that she had inherited her problematic temperament from our dad, who was a narcissist on top of everything else.

Mom and Dad divorced back in 2000, when my sister was in second grade and I was in first. As far as we could tell, our parents had demonstrated a living hate for each other ever since. Soon after the divorce a parenting plan was set up, which had my sister and me spending the weekdays with our mom and the weekends with our dad. Mondays' and Fridays' child-exchanges were managed with a barely-maintained civility towards one another. The plan didn't work out so well for us, either; on weekdays Dad worked, and he was a powerhouse, an eight-to-eight kind of guy—the busiest surgeon at the local hospital. There, he enjoyed popularity and prestige and almost always got to play the role of boss. On the weekend, by contrast, he was an unpredictable rainbow of moods, from chatty and generous, upbeat and energetic in the morning to sullen and withdrawn or even angry and vindictive by dinnertime. Crazily enough, he didn't complete the profile with an alcohol addiction (as did his little brother, my uncle); instead, he drank the booze of political paranoia. Dad preached to us frequently about the impending socialist takeover of the American government, of its vast corruption and our need to remain vigilant (and well-armed) against the plots of Big Brother. More than anything, however, he loved to rant to us about "your mother"—said just like that, spat from the mouth. She was pure evil, by his infallible reasoning: "Satan," he once said, "undermining my entire life. She's the reason I'm on blood pressure medication, why I don't sleep at night." My sister and I would look at each other and roll our eyes. Sure, Dad. As if genetics or your workaholism don't

contribute at all. To our silence he would swear, “You’ll see it one day, for yourselves. Just wait.”

If my sister struggled to connect with our mother, she felt at least (quite conspicuously) freer to express her feelings at Mom’s house than she did at Dad’s. There, we quickly learned to smother any disagreeable emotions, lest the sight of a frown on our faces provoke another of Dad’s blow-up episodes. If my sister was depressed or somehow otherwise upset, she wouldn’t ball it into volatile anger at Dad but rather shut herself in her room and lay underneath the bed (it was better that way. Once she accidentally kicked a hole in the wall. Dad got so mad that he threatened to “haul her ass off to the psych ward”; he “knew people there” that would see to it that she got the help she needed. She spent the rest of the evening repairing the damage under his supervision). At her next well-check a few weeks later the doctor asked her if she’d been having suicidal thoughts, and when my sister—believing it was in assured confidence—answered “yes,” he ordered that she be sent away for recuperation to a mental health clinic in another city. Turns out Dad had phoned the doctor in advance and arranged for him to give such advice. Mom fought it tooth and nail, surprisingly enough, and she didn’t go in the end.

My sister never sought approval from our dad the way she did from our mother, though. It stoked all the more fire, then, when my mom—as she usually did—would make comments to my sister about her appearance, which she typically found less than satisfactory for one reason or another. Often my sister was too “obnoxious” or “unmannerly.” She didn’t dress or carry herself “like a lady,” she either ate too much and slept too little, or ate too little and slept too much, depending on her mood. I don’t believe Mom intended to engender insecurity in my sister through the comments; she had simply been the eldest child herself and was moreover a critic by nature, and therefore saw what needed to be changed before she’d ever see what was actually working well. My sister hated it with such a passion, though, when Mom told her what to do, how to be; Mom dismissed her indignant protests as streaks of teenage rebellion which, if not encouraged through attention, would wither away eventually. She continued to intersperse endeavors to improve her relationship with my sister with pokes and prods at her to look, act, etc. like so-and-so. And my sister became more and more determined to spite her.

I met the Scott—the king of dependability—two years ago, in 2013, at a work party in San Diego. I’d recently moved there to begin an internship at the San

Diego Union-Tribune as an aspiring journalist. It was weird, I guess, how we instantly clicked; at the time, I had figured there was no way we could have much in common. From the outside, he seemed smart, well- educated---enviably put-together. I, on the other hand, was an internal mess. My sister had committed suicide only a month before I left our home in Ohio for California, and as hard as I was trying to leave thoughts of her behind, they had clung to me all throughout the flight, the move-in, and even into the first few weeks of my internship. I don't remember how, but Scott and I got to talking about our family backgrounds, which naturally, for me, brought up the topic of mental illness. Surprisingly, he shared a similar story: his mother had been diagnosed as bipolar when he was only ten. We both felt that mental illness had so impacted our lives, that we wanted to collaborate to write a story detailing our experiences. Scott, who was five years my senior and already in his fourth year at the paper, proposed the idea to the Union-Tribune and within a week they accepted it for their Editorial section. Cathartic does not come close to describing the process of opening up and putting into words what had weighed so heavily on me for so long. Even the research element seemed to fly by. On the day the newspaper containing our story was released, I opted to walk to work from my apartment just so that I could see it stacked in the newspaper stands. There it was, for the first time in print, distributed to office building lobbies, corner stores, and private homes throughout the city---in its tone, no shame, no fear, only love: my sister's legacy.